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Declassified
Authority: 43265 By:
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Date: 05-11-2015

P.F. Brazil

Party Reform in Brazil

An Intelligence Memorandum

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PA 79-10514
November 1979

Copy 031

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Party Reform in Brazil (U)

Summary

The government of President Figueiredo is moving to reform the political party system. A bill dissolving the existing two-party structure—established by decree in 1965—is now before Congress and will emerge by early December. The legislation, which establishes criteria for organizing and running new parties, is expected to result in the formation of four new groupings. The government hopes the increased number of parties will safely channel growing dissent. If the new system is perceived as obviously contrived, however, it could result in still more political dissatisfaction. (S)

This memorandum was prepared by [EO25x1] of the Latin America Division of the Office of Political Analysis. Information in the memorandum reflects information received through 24 October 1979. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations and the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America. Questions and comments may be addressed to the Chief of the South America Branch, Latin America Division, [EO25x1]

Party Reform in Brazil (U)

The Figueiredo government has sent to Congress its long-awaited bill on party reform, a key element in its domestic political planning. (S)

Much to Brasilia's chagrin, the nominal opposition has grown in public appeal and in recent years has made impressive gains in local and congressional elections. The once-tame progovernment party also has become prone to dissension, and some of its members have defected or refused to support the administration. (S)

The current system—a constant reminder of the more arbitrary aspects of Brazil's authoritarian rule—was created by decree in 1965. Now both the regime and politicians find it awkward, particularly when the generals are moving to reduce their political prominence. The government therefore portrays party reform as an integral part of the political liberalization process set in motion by former President Geisel and followed by President Figueiredo. (S)

At a time of growing public discontent, the regime is trying to provide officially sanctioned vehicles for a wider range of views. The government's other goals, however, are more clearly self-serving because the proposed changes are likely to:

- Guarantee its working majority in Congress.
- Scatter the increasingly vocal opposition and thus blunt its effectiveness.
- Prevent the proliferation of parties that characterized the early 1960s. (S)

The Changes

The reform legislation will disband the existing parties, specify rules for the establishment of new ones, and set criteria for their continuance. (S)

A new party can qualify for formal status with the adherence of 101 founding members, who must then establish a national directorate and hold local, regional, and national conventions within a legally prescribed period of time. A party may begin to function immediately when it forms a congressional bloc comprising at least 10 percent of both chambers. For continued representation at any level, a party would have to obtain a minimum of 5 percent of the popular vote in the national election. The bill would give the government substantial leverage over the new system by forbidding electoral coalitions and by specifying that a legislator leaving his party or failing to vote with it will lose his mandate. (S)

The reforms will bear directly on the government's ability to implement later stages of its political program. Such issues as revising the constitution and restoring direct elections will become increasingly significant. The regime appears to favor these moves—important elements of liberalization—but it also must be certain that it controls the pace of change. If the party reforms function well, they will safely channel dissent, thereby giving the regime the reassurance it seeks. (S)

The administration—although stating publicly that it will allow modification of the bill—may be taking steps to ensure that it emerges from Congress virtually unchanged.

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Under Brazilian law, the reforms then would enter into force automatically. Even if the bill is voted on, the government probably can count on its reduced but still adequate majority to resist major revisions.

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Politicians React

Some indignant members of the soon-to-be-scraped parties have objected to the proposed changes, a few even threatening to take the issue to court. Restructuring is inevitable, however, and the protests ultimately may amount to very little. The rush probably is now on to determine who will lead the new parties and who can establish the most profitable relationship with Brasilia. (S)

Once the changes take effect, four new groupings are likely to emerge. One will be openly progovernment and another will be nominally independent, but discreetly progovernment. A labor party almost certainly will be formed, as will a grouping of leftist politicians. (S)

Potential Party Leaders

Some potential leaders are in sight. Figueiredo, for example, talks of forming his "own party" once the new rules are in effect. Whether he really intends to head such a progovernment party is not clear, but he has consistently behaved like a politician seeking public support and has regularly stumped the countryside seeking to popularize the presidency and build a constituency for the government. (S)

There are a number of other prominent figures from whose ranks party leaders will emerge. On the progovernment side, one of the most influential is Bahia Governor Antonio Carlos Magalhaes, a former senator and federal official with close ties to the regime and a solid political base of his own. The venerable congressman from Minas Gerais and former Foreign Minister

Jose de Magalhaes Pinto also may become a prime mover in one of the government-oriented parties. In addition, Rio de Janeiro Governor Chagas Freitas, who has a formidable political machine, and Senator Tancredo Neves, both moderate members of the opposition, could be major figures in the nominally independent party. (S)

Leonel Brizola, recently returned from exile, seems headed for leadership of a newly reconstituted and almost certainly watered down labor party, the vehicle he rode to prominence before the military came to power. Brizola is the most famous of the exiles who have received amnesty, and the government's "liberal" credentials would be helped by allowing him a visible political role. He presumably will pledge a moderate course—the price for being permitted to resume public life. Brazil's most prestigious union leader also is talking about organizing a labor party. (S)

The new leftist grouping may be headed by one of the relatively radical members of the existing opposition party. Young, outspoken politicians belonging to the so-called "authentic" wing of the party have felt increasingly uncomfortable and have caused serious intraparty disputes. (S)

The Future

The new party structure probably will not face an electoral test before 1982, when congressional elections are scheduled and when governors again may be chosen popularly rather than indirectly. Local elections set for next year are likely to be postponed to coincide with the 1982 balloting. Such a move seems to have the backing of at least some local politicians who would prefer to run with congressional candidates and thereby benefit from the additional funding and publicity attending the more prestigious elections. Many current office holders, whose mandates would be extended an additional two years, also are pleased. This prospect, however, has drawn the fire of some opposition figures who see it as a continuation of political restrictions. (S)

The government can use the extra time to evaluate the new system and make other moves to strengthen its political position for 1982 and beyond. The results of changing economic and labor policies then will be known and their effects on the government's potential vote-getting ability will have become clear. (S)

The administration's efforts to build a stronger constituency also will continue and probably will concentrate on rural areas. Figueiredo's politicking and his government's support for agriculture point in this direction. New measures, such as defining electoral districts, could dilute the voting strength of the urban areas—the stronghold of the opposition. (S)

The crucial question for the government is whether the new system will serve its purposes any better than the one established in 1965. Past administrations have felt compelled to rig the system to ensure control of Congress and state governorships. If the new structure is too obviously contrived, it could increase dissent and heighten government concerns over popular unrest. Given the increasing complexity of Brazil's political and economic problems, the government could have more difficulty in trying to manage the new system (s).

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